

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yom Kippur

For Rabbi Avi Weiss who taught me how to remember with mercy.

5769

*"We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882... He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day. He told me, 'I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world.' And again, 'My dreams are like your vigils.' And again, toward dawn, 'My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal.'"*¹

Funes the Memorious is a fantasy short story by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, published in 1942. "Funes the Memorious" tells the story of a fictional version of Borges himself as he meets Ireneo Funes, a teenage boy who lives in Fray Bentos, Uruguay, in 1884.

Funes enumerates to Borges the cases of prodigious memory cited in the *Historia Naturalis*, and adds that he marvels that those are considered marvelous. He reveals that, since his fall from a horse, he perceives everything in full detail and remembers it all. He remembers, for example, the shape of clouds at all given moments. In order to pass the time, Funes has engaged in projects such as reconstructing a full day's worth of past memories. His world is one of intolerably uncountable details. He finds it very difficult to sleep, since he recalls "every crevice and every molding of the various houses which [surround] him."²

¹ In *Ficciones* by Jorge Luis Borges, edited by John Sturrock (original publication 1942; English translation, Grove Press, 1962; rpt. by Alfred A. Knopf/Everyman, 1993), 83-91. Translated by Anthony Kerrigan.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funes,_the_Memorious

Funes, the fictional character of Borges, has a prodigious memory, but even more, he can't forget anything. For Funes, an Argentine precursor of the main character of the movie "Rain Man," the apparent blessing becomes a curse. *"My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal."*

At first we look at Funes with envy. Who doesn't wish to have a prodigious memory? Who hasn't dreamed of mastering a language overnight, or the secrets of the universe, or remembering all the brands of cigars available in the market?

However, Funes lived a miserable life. When you have to spend every single minute of your life remembering, you don't have time, or energy, to live your own life.

Now I must tell you the story of Mr. Greener.

Mr. Greener didn't have a prodigious memory, but he couldn't forget.

Mr. Greener lived in Roanoke, Virginia. I hope he still lives there, although he was in his mid 80s when I became the rabbi of Beth Israel in 1998.

You need to be a Funes to know by name every single Jew in New York, or in Queens, or even in Jamaica Estates or Fresh Meadows. However, in Roanoke, you may only need a few months to meet every Jewish person in town. You should know that most Jews in Roanoke are affiliated with one of the two synagogues in town, but even if they are not affiliated you bump into them sooner or later. That is how I got to know Mr. Greener.

I was only one of two people wearing a yarmulke at all times in Roanoke. The other one was my son Ilan. You won't stop someone wearing a yarmulke in New York to start a conversation just because he happens to have his head covered. However, walking with a yarmulke on your head in Roanoke, Virginia, is an invitation for brief comments and why not a conversation? On another occasion I will tell some of my other stories, but today I would like to tell you about Mr. Greener.

I met Mr. Greener at the supermarket. He was one of the seniors standing by the cashier, bagging the items people bought at Kroger's. When he saw me for the first time he greeted me with a beautiful "Sholem Aleichem!"

Here in New York, you would wave back and say "Aleichem Sholem," but not in Roanoke, Virginia. By then I knew all my congregants well enough to know that Mr. Greener was not one of them. I also knew he didn't belong to the Reform Temple in town. So I wanted to hear his story and this is what he told me:

"Rabbi, you should know that I have lived in Roanoke for more than 50 years and I used to be an active member in your synagogue. But in the early 1950s, before your time, there was a religious school principal in your synagogue (he added the words 'before your time, to make sure that I was not offended by his remarks) who discriminated against my son and didn't include him in one of the Purim plays, and so I dropped my membership altogether and, since then, I haven't stepped foot in the shul."

I tried to reason with Mr. Greener but to no avail. Mr. Greener had a prodigious memory and he couldn't forget the affront of the early 50s and so Mr. Greener had alienated himself from an active Jewish life. Although he was a proud Jew (maybe too proud), he refused to come back to the synagogue as a way of protest.

I explained to Mr. Greener that we could "use" someone like him at Beth Israel; after all, there are not many Jews in Roanoke who know how to greet you with a warm "Sholem Aleichem!" I told Mr. Greener that the "war was over," that many rabbis and principals had come and gone since the early 50s, but Mr. Greener couldn't forget and because he couldn't forget, he also couldn't forgive.

Many of us grew up with the motto: Zachor! – Remember! "Gedenken und kein Mol Nisht Fargesn!" – Remember, remember and never forget.

We were told to remember and with good reason. After six million of our people were murdered in Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek, remembering became an ethical imperative.

We Jews are experts in remembering. History made us experts. Even when we wanted to forget, they didn't let us...

And what is this sacred moment of Yizkor if not about memory, about remembering our loved ones, so their memory won't be forgotten?

However, as my friend Alan Goldstein says, "Sometimes you have to have a short memory!" Sometimes, in order to move on in life, you must remember to forget.

As a matter of fact, we all live with selective memories, a mixture of reminiscence and forgetfulness.

Funes the Memorious didn't have a selective memory. He remembered everything and when you remember everything you can't love, or have friends, or attain happiness.

"I recall for you the loving-kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me in the desert, in a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2).

Even God has selective memories. God remembers Israel with loving-kindness. God knows how to keep score but he chooses not to.

"I recall for you the loving-kindness of your youth," says God. This is what I choose to remember. To keep our relationship going, I choose to remember selectively, only the good moments of our relationship.

Mr. Greener also had a selective memory. He remembered the affronts done to him but he couldn't remember any good times. He lived by himself. He lived a sad life.

I don't want to be like Funes, or like Mr. Greener. A good memory yes, but a flawless memory won't do it for me.

As we remember our loved ones who are not physically with us any more, we give them life in our memories.

Are you going to keep score with your loved ones? With your wife, your parents, your children, your congregation?

Human beings are complex. Our parents, our children, our spouses were not perfect, are not perfect, and so we too are multifaceted and complex. The way we choose to remember them will affect not only the way we live our lives, but also the way we will be remembered by our loved ones.

Yizkor! We ask God to remember. While God has the ability to remember everything, we ask Him to remember the merits of our loved ones, to remember selectively. Therefore, when it comes to our turn to remember our loved ones, our friends, our fellow congregants, we need to learn to remember with kindness, with understanding, with forgiveness.

On this sacred day, we are asking God to remember with mercy. Shouldn't we do the same? Shouldn't we give the gift of good memories to our loved ones, to ourselves? Maybe if we remember with kindness, maybe if we give others the benefit of the doubt, God will do the same with us and will remember and judge us favorably.

As we remember our loved ones who have gone the way of all the earth, we ask you God to help us build good selective memories, so we will be remembered as a blessing, as we, this day, lovingly remember those whose lives endure as a blessing.